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Following Good Leads

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In publishing the serialization of Dr. Williamson's *The Case of the Disappearing/Appearing Slow Learner: An Interpretive Mystery* in the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* in an unfolding of five installments, I have followed an interesting adventure, a mystery full of excitement, turns, breath-holding, unconcealments, and phenomenological pauses. There were many reasons that I invited and welcomed Dr. Williamson's showcasing of his doctoral thesis in this journal in this particular format as exemplary of applied hermeneutics. However beyond my initial intentions, I am reflective of the results and implications it has had for me in my own thinking about doctoral hermeneutic research and of my own hermeneutic research. In no small part, it has reminded me of the necessary task in hermeneutics of *following good leads*.

I first learned of Dr. Williamson's proposal to present his hermeneutic study in the form of a hard-boiled detective novel through his doctoral supervisor, Dr. Jim Field, who subsequently invited me to join John's supervisory committee. The idea was exciting to me, provocative, creative, energetic - - and "dangerous" if it was poorly done.

It was not.

However, it did invoke a different sense of danger, a danger that is inherent in applied hermeneutic research - - a hermeneutic wager to take a risk. The danger I speak of here lies in the idea that when the work is done well, it involves unconcealment - - it is disquieting, disruptive, and evocative. John's work is an example of applied hermeneutics: interpretation and understanding taken to practice, applied to a topic, and taking the wager to deconstruct and then re-construct.

As Professor Hodge wrote in his eloquent editorial (Hodge, 2016), this work is a reminder that hermeneutic work does not have to always be presented in the traditional thesis style but, if it is

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presented differently, it has to be done well. It has to maintain scholarship, integrity, rigor, and an intellectual facility that cannot be “played with” in the sense of just having “fun for fun’s sake” as opposed to the carefulness of play in a Gadamerian sense, where “the *primacy of play over the consciousness of the player* is fundamentally acknowledged” (Gadamer 1960/2004, p. 105, italics in original).

For Gadamer, the significance of play is that when one is fully involved in play, it takes one outside of oneself and the game becomes more than a subjective experience. Play at the same time requires seriousness to be properly absorbing but also frees the player into responsiveness to the flow of the game. Play is not random: it has rules, participants, and a field of play but its possible outcome is open. (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015, pp. 42-43)

The play in John’s applied hermeneutics is playfully serious. As I mentioned in a footnote of the first editorial for this work, Dr. Williamson won the 2015 University of Calgary Chancellor’s Graduate medal - - and he won it for a reason. The work is taken seriously.

The conceptualization and execution of a hermeneutic study presented in the form of a hard-boiled detective novel did a remarkable mirroring of the topic itself. As Professor Hodge wrote, it allowed the topic to appear and disappear, just as the label of “slow learner” has done in the history of education, categorization, and disability studies. The scholarship, however, never disappeared. One might be lured and captivated by the story itself for periods of times almost believing the credibility of a museum of a history of classification of disability (Hodge, 2016), but then a reminder came through the carefully footnoted academic and scholarly citatiousness of the work. Williamson knew the work of scholars that shored up the “fictional” story that contained a very real topic. The theory and philosophy was never lost and also never compromised the story. This is work of literary genius, but herein lies the first sense of danger that I referred to: *not everyone can do this*.

The danger lies in a possible misconception that hermeneutic work is superficial, an assumption that there is no method, there are no rules, no guidelines, or that “anything goes.” John reminds us that there is not only one way to work hermeneutically, or to apply hermeneutics in a research capacity as a “method.” Caputo reminds us that method in the etymological sense is “making one’s way along (*meta*) the path (*odos*) to truth” (Caputo, 2015, p. xi). In Moules et al. (2015), the authors wrote of the idea of “being methodical and following leads” (p. 55) but what is perhaps missed in their discussion is that the leads have to be *good* leads! The “discipline of attending to things” (Dostal, 2002, p. 251) involves a very careful discernment of the intention of the medium in which the work is shown. There are creative works that are very intentional and purposeful and they are presented in particular ways because they are consistent with the topic.

As another example, I offer the doctoral work of Dr. Debb Hurlock (2003; 2008) who was examining the use of Bronwen Wallace’s poetry in teaching nursing classes for deliberate pedagogic purposes. There are many poems in her thesis, including Wallace’s but also Hurlock’s own poetry - - and this makes sense. After all, her thesis is about the pedagogic possibilities that lie in poetry. I have, however, read other theses and even published hermeneutic papers where there is what appears to be random poems that are thrown in for some emphasis or attempt at

creativity that does nothing to enliven the topic being discussed. It appears instead that they are an effort to appear adventuresome, poetic, and interpretive, and that is somehow associated with thinking and writing hermeneutically. It is here where we run into the difficulty of our work being dismissed as trite, insubstantial, superficial, and sometimes just silly.

This is the challenge I face with students who embark on hermeneutic research: constantly negotiating how to teach students to be care-full, considerate, discerning, attentive, and scholarly, while nurturing the capacity to think and write interpretively and taking some well-considered risks. This is a continual learning for me in my own work as well and what most often guides me is the constant presence of the *topic* on my shoulder asking if what I am doing, and how I am doing it, is taking me toward the topic or further away from it.

Max Hunter, in his search for the disappearing/appearing slow learner, seems to know this. He is sometimes following bad leads that take him away from what he seeks, and often get him into trouble! As a skilled and hard-boiled detective though, he seems to catch himself in time and although he comes away a little bruised and worse for wear, he recovers his trail and seems to even know when he is getting close to something that is important. This is the work of interpretation in hermeneutic research. Something in our interviews/transcripts might catch our attention and we are off on an exhilarating tangent and chase, finding dozens of books and papers that inform us about the interpretation and it is captivating and exciting - - and sometimes it works. Other times, it really has been a bad lead and has taken us away from the mystery of the topic. A little battered and bruised, we have to give up the lead and all those hours of investigation, and head home to the data and start again. These are careful considerations that often cannot be done alone and need the help of others, just as Max is saved by Foucault and Derrida, Gadamer and Heidegger, or Colleen Birdseye, just when he needs them!

The serialization of this work offers an adventure that is fictional and yet it is not. It is a fictionalization of a very real topic and concern. This is what distinguishes this work as applied hermeneutics - - research that seeks to understand the complexity of human experiences and grapples with the great problems that we encounter in our everyday practices and lives (McCaffrey & Moules, 2016).

Of all actions, those performed for a purpose have been least understood, no doubt because they have always been counted the most understandable and are to our consciousness the most commonplace. The great problems are to be encountered in the street. (Nietzsche, 1881/1982, p. 78)

Dr. Williamson takes us to the streets in a very literal sense in Max's hard-boiled detective work investigating the great problem presented in this work. In doing so, Dr. Williamson offers us a particularly good lead in his work, one that takes us closer to the possibility that applied hermeneutic work, when done well, *can* look different and still be scholarly and academic. It is a reminder to me that when one listens deeply to the topic, the topic has something to say about how it needs to be investigated and sometimes (or not) even found.

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